



# An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans (17) Personal Greetings and Final Remarks

Romans 16

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So, we have come to the last chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. The chapter consists mostly of greetings and commendations. As such it is more personal than the other chapters and it gives us a glimpse into the way people related to one another in the early church. It is not much fun to read unless you enjoy the challenge of sounding out unfamiliar names on the fly, but it does give some interesting insights into life in the early church as well as some valuable closing remarks and so it is well worthy of our time. While not every part of the Bible is of equal value, it is all valuable because it is all the word of God to us.

One of the significant features of this chapter is the prominence of women. Clearly Paul was not a misogynist – that is, a man who feels that men are superior to women – in spite of how he is often characterized because of his God-ordained teaching on the headship of men in the home and the church. Women were very active in the early church and were significant fellow-laborers with Paul in his missionary enterprise. There are a lot of women mentioned in Romans 16 and it is clear that Paul thought as highly of them as he thought highly of faithful, godly men.

He begins with a commendation of Phoebe. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well." Commendations like this were common in the

letters of the time. When you meet a person, you have never met before, a commendation from a mutually known third party, helps you know that the person you are meeting is someone who can be trusted and respected. Phoebe got this kind of recommendation from the apostle Paul. It is thought that she was the one who actually delivered Paul's letter to the church at Rome and when they read the letter they would know right away that this woman, Phoebe, was a faithful servant of the Lord back in her home church.

Paul refers to her as a "servant of the church at Cenchreae." You may notice that there is a footnote in the ESV which indicates that the word "servant" can also be translated as "deaconess." The Greek word is *deakonon* from which we get our work deacon. This verse is a much-discussed verse in the whole matter of women as deaconesses in the church. This verse itself cannot be decisive in this debate because the Greek word can refer either to a person who holds an office called deaconess or it can simply refer to a servant. Whether you think that Phoebe was an office-bearer or whether she was a non-ordained servant of the church at Cenchreae depends on how you interpret other verses relating to the question of whether women can hold office in the church and how you understand the biblical teaching of male headship to apply to the office of deacon.

Actually, our ARP Form of Government allows for women deacons. This is what it says in FOG 5:4, "Unless otherwise determined by the Session, the Diaconate shall be chosen from male members of that congregation. The Session of each congregation shall determine whether women can serve as deacons in their own particular congregation. In either case, the Church shall not neglect the raising up of qualified men to serve in this position."

It is possible to have women ordained as deacons, if you construe the formal diaconate as having no connection to male headship in the church. Obviously, the office of elder is the chief ruling office in the church, under Christ, and so it is possible to think of the office of deacon as a non-ruling position and thus open to women. Conservative Reformed Churches have generally restricted the office of deacon to men – thus indicating some aspect of male headship to belong to the

office of deacon. And certainly, the way that our deacons operate includes significant authority to make decisions even while they are under the Session, and it seems appropriate to see a connection between male headship and the office of deacon. That is why we do not ordain woman as deacons. And so, we believe that Phoebe was a non-ordained servant of the church at Cenchreae. But this verse itself cannot decide that issue. How you interpret it depends on your interpretation of other passages dealing with the diaconate and male headship including Paul's teaching about women not having authority over men in the church.

Also, in the light of the huge assault on the biblical teaching about gender roles in the home and the church, it seems necessary to be very clear about the biblical teaching on male headship in the church and as well as in the home. Of course, the world considers us to be misogynist and backward and demeaning to women. What else is new. The world considers us to be fools and bigots for many reasons because we seek to be faithful to all the word of God. Being despised by the world is part of the cost we embrace when we become Christians. It goes with the territory.

Anyway, faithfully reflecting the word of God requires us to maintain male headship no matter how unpopular that might be, but it also requires us to value and recognize and celebrate the contributions of women to the life and ministry of the church. While the faithful exercise of authority is important for the wellbeing and thriving of the church, there are plenty of other things that are every bit as vital and important. After all, Jesus taught us that those who are greatest in the church are those who serve. You do not need to be ordained to serve. And indeed, much of the most important and significant work in the church is done by women who quietly serve their Lord and their brothers and sisters including their husbands and children.

I don't want to minimize the importance of leadership, but when you are in a position of ordained leadership, you soon realize that most of the important work in the church is done by the nonordained people loving and serving their Lord and one another. And in that kind of important kingdom-building work women excel.

So, we have many deaconesses like Phoebe in our church. They just happen not to be ordained. But without their service the church is dead – a shell – a lifeless institution. Greatness in the church is measured by service and non-ordained service is every bit as vital and as worthy of recognition and celebration as ordained service.

Paul is pretty enthusiastic about his commendation of Phoebe and your leadership is every bit as enthusiastic about the Phobes in our congregation. What matters is service and there are those among us who are worthy of the title, “servant of the church of Riverside.” And there is no title that is more worthy of commendation and honor among the Christ-followers in God’s kingdom.

Paul also mentions that Phoebe had been a patron of many including Paul. She was probably a woman of means and used her wealth to facilitate the work of the Church. Having money can be a temptation and a snare, but it can also be used in powerful ways to support the work of church and kingdom and has often been used to do so in the history of the church and still today.

There is another “women in office” issue in this passage that we must deal with. It is found in verse 7 which says, “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well-known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.” From the translation in the ESV there does not seem to be anything in this verse that has anything to do with the “women in office” issue, but that is because translation is not an exact science and the Greek in this verse can yield a different translation here. Thomas Schreiner, who is one of the leading conservative New Testament scholars living today, translates this verse as follows. “Greet Andronicus and Junia(s), my kindred and fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who were also in Christ before me.” Thomas Schreiner is not a “woman in office” guy, but he thinks that this is the best translation of this verse and that translation refers to a woman named “Junia” as an apostle. So, you can understand why this verse is part of the “women in office” issue. If Junia was an apostle like Paul was an apostle - that has major implications for the “women in office” issue.

However, also here, how you interpret and apply this verse depends on your understanding of the other relevant verses having to do with male headship in the church. Schreiner points out that the term “apostle” did not only apply to the twelve apostles plus Paul. He writes in this commentary on this verse, “The term apostolos is used of itinerant evangelists in the Apostolic Fathers.... they did not exercise the same kind of authority as Paul, Barnabas, or James the brother of Jesus. As a female missionary Junia may have directed her energies especially to other women ... One should scarcely conclude from the reference to Junia and the other coworkers named here that women exercised authority over men contrary to the Pauline admonition in 1 Timothy 2:12” (p.796-797).

So, these verses in Romans 16 do not contradict other verses in Paul’s writings about the male headship in the church, but they do give powerful testimony concerning the vital role women played in the life of the early church and its missionary efforts. And of course, they have been doing so ever since.

Something else that these commendations and greetings reflect is the warmth and love in the relationships in the early church. The New Testament writings, including Romans, make it clear that there were tensions and struggles with unity in the early church, as there have been throughout the history of the Church. But that reality should not obscure the fact that there was also much love and unity and affection between the members of the Church in New Testament times. This reflects the Christian life in general. Christians still have sinful natures this side of their final transformation at death or the end of the age, but there is also the fruit of God’s grace in their lives. So, while they are not perfect and there are flaws, God is at work in them and their lives reflect that.

So, in these greetings we get a peek at the affection and respect and love that Paul felt for his fellow-believers and fellow-workers. We have already noticed how highly he speaks of Phoebe in verses 1 and 2. Listen to how he writes of Prisca and Aquila in verses 3-4. “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but all the churches of the Gentiles

give thanks as well.” Clearly Paul was fond of this couple and thankful for what they had done for him. We do not know exactly what that was, but somehow, they risked their necks in order to help Paul in some way.

He uses the term “beloved” quite a few times in these verses as well as the term “fellow worker.” He is eager to acknowledge those who have faithfully served the Lord alongside him in the cause of the gospel. Paul, at the point of writing this letter, had never met the Roman congregation as a whole, but he clearly knew many of the people who had ended up there and there was a lot of warmth and affection in Paul’s relationships with the people that he mentions by name.

That is reflected also in his exhortation, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” As we have noticed when we considered chapters 14 and 15, unity and love and affection between believers is a hugely important part of the Christian life according to the New Testament. This exhortation to “Greet one another with a holy kiss” is part of that emphasis. Christians are to greet one another warmly.

This exhortation is also significant for our understanding of how to apply the teaching of the Bible in the light of the vast cultural differences between the ancient world and our own. Even in our time there are differences between different cultures in how people greet one another. In some cultures, people still greet one another with a kiss. In our culture, husbands and wives tend to greet one another with a kiss and grandparents demand kisses from their younger grandchildren, but we do not tend to greet our friends with a kiss or our fellow-believers no matter how warmly we feel about them. But we convey the same message with a handshake or a hug. For us a handshake or a hug conveys the same message as the kiss did in the ancient world of the early church and so faithfulness to the exhortation to “Greet one another with a holy kiss” can be done in a way that is normal and conformable in our culture. We can fulfill the intention of the exhortation while expressing it in a different way reflecting how welcome and affection is expressed in our culture. The key, of course, is that we still fulfill the intention of the exhortation by greeting one another warmly.

Now sometimes people apply this principle of interpretation in ways that violate the intention of the original exhortation. That is what happens when the texts about male headship or homosexuality, for instance, are dismissed as being culturally relative. That kind of interpretive approach violates the intention of the biblical author and it guts the authority of the word of God. There is a vast difference between exchanging a handshake for a holy kiss and declaring that the principle of male headship in the home and church is a cultural matter that can be abandoned as times change. The key is that the intention of the original author must be upheld and applied in order to be faithful to the word of God and in order to submit to its authority.

Now as part of his final remarks in this letter, Paul includes a warning about those who cause divisions by introducing false teachings. Verses 17-19, "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil."

The placement of this warning right near the end of the letter, gives it a certain urgency. It is something that Paul feels needs to be said before he signs off. False teaching is a very big deal in the New Testament. It is something that is often addressed, and it is something that is expressed with great urgency. The spirit of the New Testament is very very different from the spirit of our age which says that it does not really matter what one believes as long as one is sincere and as long as one is tolerant of those who think differently. Indeed, the only place where our society is intolerant is in its root conviction that everyone must be free to express themselves as they wish as long as they do not harm anyone else in so doing.

The Bible, however, takes its truth-claims very seriously and it takes deviations from those truth claims seriously as well. There is a great deal in the New Testament writings warning against false teachers and false teachers are those who teaching anything that contradicts the

apostolic teaching that has come down to us in the form of the New Testament. The New Testament contains Jesus' teaching as he, through the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles. Apostolic doctrine is God's truth and any deviation from it is treated very seriously.

It is that concern that is reflected in verses 17-19 of this chapter. It is significant that Paul's approach to this matter is exactly opposite those who minimize the importance of sound doctrine and advocate a vague and ambiguous approach to the interpretation of Scripture. It has often been said that doctrine divides, but Paul teaches here that it is false teachers who divide. Verse 17 says, "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught." Paul is concerned throughout his writings that everything that he has taught be accepted as the word of God. And in his mind, those who contradicted it in any way were the causers of divisions and he is rather severe in his denunciation of them as he is here. "For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve."

Now this does not mean that anyone who is different than us in the interpretation of Scripture in any way is a false teacher. There is a huge difference between those who bow to the authority of the whole word of God, and who differ from us and those who deny parts of the word of God. If we must agree on every detail of our understanding of Scripture before we recognize one another as faithful believers, the circle will be very small. However, there is such a thing as false teaching and when a teaching departs from the core orthodoxy of historic Christianity it comes under the heading of false teaching and is to be watched out for - heeding the warning of this and similar passages.

It is because of warnings such as these and the general concern of Scripture with truth and sound doctrine that it takes a lot of study and many examinations for someone to become a minister in our churches and why in order to become an elder in our churches one must have a good knowledge of the confessions. According to Titus 1:9 elders, and that includes ministers, "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and

also to rebuke those who contradict it." Likewise, one of the goals of teaching in the church according to Ephesians 4:14 is that "we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

This is why teaching the truth of God's word and its sound interpretation is such a big deal in our churches. The Bible itself is very concerned about sound teaching and an accurate understanding of the word of God. Truth is a life and death matter according to the Bible. And one of Satan's tactics, seeking to lead people into destruction is by the introduction of false teaching into the church. This warning of Paul right at the end of his letter to the Romans reflects the real danger of false teaching and the absolute necessity of sound biblical doctrine.

Verse 20 reflects the great conflict that underlies the whole biblical story and the victory that God has won and will one day consolidate through Jesus Christ and his followers. "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." This little sentence speaks volumes of the nature of reality and what is really going on in the world and in history.

Notice the striking juxtaposition of peace and war. "The God of peace will soon crush Satan." This says so much about the real nature of things! God is the God of peace. But the way to peace is war with Satan. The lack of peace in the world is due to Satan and the sin and destruction that follow in his train. The truth about the true nature of things is that the only way to peace is through the destruction of evil. The only way for us to have peace is through being delivered from sin and Satan and the only way for there to be peace on earth is through the conquest of Jesus Christ over the kingdom of Satan. The story of the Bible is the story of how God, through Jesus, wins the victory over Satan. 1 John 3:8 says, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." And we are enlisted in that conquest.

"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." What a glorious statement in those few words! The meaning of history is God's defeat of Satan. Jesus dealt the decisive blow on through his death and resurrection and those who by God's grace are followers of Jesus are

engaged in that struggle and are assured of their final victory. “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”

That is true in our personal struggle with sin in our own lives and in the great cosmic struggle against Satan and his forces in this world. The good news is that sin and evil will not have the final word, not in our personal lives, nor in the world as a whole. And, in the end, there will be peace because that is God’s goal through Jesus Christ – the peace of the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness shall dwell.

The last part of this chapter and the closing words of the letter are words of encouragement and words of perspective. The encouragement is the grace of God in Christ. The last part of verse 20 says “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” And the closing doxology speaks of the strength that comes from God through the gospel. “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has not been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith....

The letter closes with a reminder of the strength that God gives to his people through the gospel. We are involved in the great struggle between God and Satan and good and evil. That great struggle is both inside of us and all around us. The good news is that God strengthens his people – he brings about the obedience of faith. The struggle is real. The struggle is hard. But God in Christ gives the strength to persevere and to overcome and he brings about the obedience of faith. That is the encouragement.

And the perspective is the fundamental perspective of life itself. – “[T]o the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

This is where Paul’s letter to the Romans leaves us – this is where the gospel leaves us – this is the goal of our salvation and of everything else including the destruction of Satan and evil – “to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

This is what drove Paul in his ministry. This is the fruit of the gospel in the lives of God’s people. This is the thing that is most delightful and

satisfying to the hearts of those who are being transformed by the gospel. May this be the goal and the driver of our lives.